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ABSTRACT

"Culture shock" is the expression generally associated with the frustrations that occur when persons have difficulty functioning in a different culture or when persons are exposed to individuals from another culture. Culture shock typically occurs in a 4-stage process that can unfold over varying lengths of time: the honeymoon, crisis, resolution, and stabilization. The honeymoon stage exists during the initial intrigue with a place; the crisis stage occurs when an event or situation becomes a significant obstacle; the resolution stage begins when a means for dealing with the obstacle encountered begins to be developed; and the stabilization stage occurs when the earlier confusion has been resolved and a balanced outlook is achieved. For one instructor who experienced culture shock while teaching in China, an incident with his students and plagiarized materials taught him that plagiarizing research documents is not considered a serious offense in China--he used the incident to explain to his students that writing research papers was done a bit differently in the United States. The key to dealing successfully with culture shock rests with being able to recognize the stages of culture shock as they are being experienced. Once the shock in "culture shock" is understood, it can be changed from a frustrating experience to a learning experience. (NKA)

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UNDERSTANDING THE SHOCK IN "CULTURE SHOCK"

As international commerce and travel continues to flourish, we frequently find ourselves interacting with individuals who are culturally different from us. There are enrichments and frustrations that evolve from such encounters. "Culture shock" is the expression generally associated with the frustrations that occur when we have difficulty functioning in a different culture or when we are exposed to individuals from another culture. Note the latter situation does not necessitate our being in a foreign land. Culture shock can occur in our own hometowns and workplaces.

I am a professor of interpersonal communication. Most of my research deals with cross-cultural communication and how the communication process can be improved overall. The field has grown considerably since I completed my Ph.D. in 1982, but the focus on culture shock has been strong and steady since the beginnings of cross-cultural study. Culture shock is a phenomenon with very real and direct consequences but it can be interpreted and understood from a theoretical perspective.

Culture shock typically occurs in a four stage process that can unfold over varying lengths of time: the honeymoon, crisis, resolution and stabilization stages. The **honeymoon stage** exists during our initial intrigue with a place, person

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and/or perspective that is culturally different (but interesting) to us. It is during this stage that we somewhat rejoice in that which is different. The **crisis stage** occurs when we are confronted with an event or situation that confuses us to the degree that it becomes a significant obstacle. This confusion can typically lead to frustration and anger. The **resolution stage** begins when we start to develop a means for dealing with the obstacle encountered in the crisis stage. During this period we develop a resolution mechanism, or approach, that can be used when encountering future obstacles. The **stabilization stage** is the final period of culture shock when we have resolved the earlier confusion and have achieved a balanced outlook.

The culture shock stages are exemplified in a situation I experienced as a visiting professor in China. I have visited China six times (where I lecture at a university in Beijing). **Honeymoon stage:** During the early days of my first visit I was elated to be there and was very impressed with the people I met and was especially impressed with the diligence portrayed by my students. **Crisis stage:** A significant problem arose when I discovered some of my students had plagiarized some of the material they included in their written reports they turned in for my class. That is, they included material authored by someone else without crediting authorship of the material, thus implying they wrote it. I was disturbed by this because they were fine people and I assumed my reporting the incident would result

in their removal from the university.

Resolution stage: I did report the incident and learned the situation was not perceived to be a problem in China. In the U.S. we stress individual ownership of many things, including ideas. In this case we would expect ideas of others to be footnoted. In China ideas, in this particular scenario, are recognized as belonging to the masses (that is, they belong to society) and there is not a stringent need to reference a source as directly as we do in the U.S. **Stabilization stage:** I bridged the U.S. and Chinese approaches for using the work of another person by telling my students if they come to the U.S. they must directly footnote external sources or they will suffer grave consequences. It was not an issue for me after that.

As indicated earlier you don't have to leave the U.S. to experience culture shock. I am a professor at a school in central Ohio and have culture shock experiences, similar to the aforementioned incident, that occur on my campus. Roughly ten percent of our student body is from outside of the U.S.

In the military context culture shock can occur in training situations that involve participants from different cultural backgrounds. I experienced culture shock in such a a training situation that included Iranians during the summer of 1978 at a U.S. military installation (roughly a year before the 1979 Iranian revolution that resulted in U.S. and Iranian tensions). **Honeymoon stage:** I lived next door to two

Iranians, Ahmad and Yahdi, in base housing. We were attending the same school and I enjoyed learning about their culture during idle hours in the evening and on weekends.

Crisis stage: One evening, after I returned from the library, I smelled an unusual odor coming from the bathroom that Ahmad and I shared. The bathroom was located between our bedrooms and we each had an entrance to the bathroom. There was also loud obnoxious music coming from his room. I entered the bathroom and found the sink and bathtub contained what I can best describe as smelly food scrape. They smelled very bad. I opened his door and found he and Yahdi were preparing a large meal and had some unappealing (to my ears) music blaring. I had planned to shave, shower and study the rest of the evening but this situation stopped me in my tracks. They were oblivious to my concerns about the smell and sound. I considered moving to another room but was aware our building was full. I shaved at a sink in the janitor's closet, got no shower, was not able to study because of the music, and had trouble sleeping because of the smell. I was tired and irritable the next day and didn't speak to them.

Resolution stage: I noticed the next evening that the bathroom was clean and there was no loud music playing in Ahmad's room. Late in the evening I saw Ahmad in the hallway and he acted as if the previous evening's confusion had not occurred. As I visited with him I realized the confusion had not occurred for him. He was unaware of my anger until I explained my perception of the situation. He explained it

was some type of holy day for them and that it was common for them to engage in that behavior during such days. I was comforted to know it would not happen often.

Stabilization stage: I asked Ahmad to give me advance notice before unusual events, such as what I had encountered in the aforementioned incident, occurred in the future. This would allow me to plan accordingly and avoid disruption. He honored my request. It turned out to be a learning experience as I learned a little about their holy days and how they observed them.

The key to successfully dealing with culture shock rests with being able to recognize the stages of culture shock as you experience them. This will allow you to be more rationale in your responses to what you encounter. If you experience frustration but can rationally understand why you are frustrated this can help reduce the anxiety.

During a visit to Senegal (west Africa) I became fearful when I perceived many people were staring at me. I interpreted their stares as being a threat until I thought about the situation and realized I was the only white person in the area I was visiting and I was dressed different than they were. It was understandable for them to be curious about me.

Recognizing culture shock won't make it totally disappear but, like many problems, recognition is the first step toward understanding. Once you understand the shock in "culture shock" you can change it from a frustrating

experience to a learning experience.

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